DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 108 083 CG 009 902

AUTHOR Witchel, Robert
TITLE Fantasy and Experiential-Gestalt Therapy.
PUB DATE [Nov 74]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Workship of the Florida Personnel and Guidance Association (25th, Jacksonville, Florida, November 21-23, 1974); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 PLUS POSTAGE. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Development; *Counseling Theories; *Creative Thinking; *Fantasy; Interpersonal Relationship; Speeches; *Therapy; Thought Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Gestalt Therapy

ABSTRACT

Fantasy activities are part of everyday experience. The author imagines hugging or touching someone, daydreams about sitting on a bench or riverbank, visualizes standing up during a boring meeting and shouting "let's wake up and do something!" Fantasy is also a tool that can be used in experimenting with new behavior, becoming more aware of experience, and as a therapeutic technique. Fantasy provides a creative stage on which to explore unlimited potentials. The author identifies his own counseling style as Experiential-Gestalt and discovers that fantasy is the most creative and powerful technique available to him. In this paper, he briefly shares some basics of Experiential Gestalt therapy, and describes how fantasy relates to these principles. Then he presents some ways that he uses fantasy in his own life, as well as how fantasy contributes to counseling relationships in which he is involved. (Author)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HARD COPY NOT AVAILABLE

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED108083

CG009902

# FANTASY AND EXPERIENTIAL-GESTALT THERAPY

Bob Witchel, ED.D.
Student Mental Health
University of Florida

My fantasy activities are part of my everyday experience - I imagine hugging or touching someone; I daydream about sitting on a beach or riverbank; I visualize standing up during a boring meeting and shouting "let's wake up and do something!" Fantasy is also a tool that I've learned to use in my experimenting with new behavior, becoming more aware of my experience, and as a therapeutic technique (which I'll describe later). Fantasy provides me with a creative stage on which to explore my unlimited potentials.

I identify my own counseling style as Experiential-Gestalt and have discovered that fantasy is the most creative and powerful technique available to me. In this paper, I will briefly share some basics of Experiential-Gestalt therapy, and specifically describe how fantasy relates to these principles. Then I'll present some ways that I use fantasy in my own life, as well as how fantasy contributes to counseling relationships I'm involved with.

## Experiential-Gestalt Therapy

Experiential-Gestalt therapy utilizes Gestalt-awareness techniques (i.e., fantasy) (Perls, et. al., 1951; Stevens, 1971), the hot-seat workshop model of Fritz Perls (1969), and experiential psychotherapy methods (Gendlin, 1973; Kempler, 1967; Whitaker & Malone, 1953), focusing strongly on the on-going interaction between the therapist and client.

Some basic principles of Experiential-Gestalt therapy include -

1. Awareness: A major ingredient of Experiential-Gestalt therapy is my awareness of personal experience. There are three ways to focus awareness - awareness of my present inside world (i.e., I'm aware of breathing, tensing, moving, laughing, hurting, and other inner events); awareness of my present environment (i.e., I'm aware of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and sensing the world around me); awareness of fantasy, including all mental activity beyond present on-going experience (i.e., imagining, thinking, guessing, planning, predicting, remembering the past, anticipating the future). A healthy person will experience a flow between these kinds of awareness rather than get stuck with only one.

2. the here-and-now - paying attention to what is happening in the present rather than the remembered past or anticipated future, is an encouraged aspect of the Experiential-Gestalt therapy. Being aware of my own here-and-now behavior (including body movement, fantasies) offers me messages and knowledge about what I am doing, what I may want, and how I may be stopping myself from feeling better. The future and past may be brought into the present through the use of fantasy.

3. I-and-thou - Experiential-Gestalt therapy involves the interaction of at least two persons - me and you. I pay attention to my awareness of me and how I experience you, and share this with you; hopefully, you will do the same with me. The fantasies I have while I'm with you are also important to share. Together, by each of us saying and doing those things which are pertinent to our needs, we will discover new possibilities towards increasing our potentials.

4. Whole person - Experiential-Gestalt therapy recognizes that a person works as a whole, rather than an entity split into dichotomies such as mind and body, or thinking and feeling. My thoughts, feelings, bodily expressions, fantasies and dreams are all interrelated and contribute to my "whol ness." Witchel (1972) offers a more complete review of Experiential-Gestalt principles and practices.

## My Own Use of Fantasy

I was told in grammer school to "stop day-dreaming" and pay attention to reality (i.e., spelling, arithmetic, and reading about Dick and Jane). Fantasy was described as childish and unreal, and besides "life is too important to imagine it away." I guess I stopped paying attention to most of my fantasies and don't remember sharing with anyone the few I allowed myself to have.

Recently, I have re-discovered my ability and need to fantasize, and today value how fantasy contributes to my daily experience. Fantasy is my "time machine", "jet-airliner", and "magic wand" towards completing unfinished gestalts from my past and immediate present, and exploring future unknown experiences.

Some specific ways I utilize fantasy in my own life are:

1. If I'm unsure or confused, I can close my eyes, and notice what appears on my fantasy movie screen. As I wrote the last sentence I got unsure about demonstrating how a fantasy could clear up confusion for me - so I closed my eyes and I saw all shapes and sizes of rocks - my immediate perception was - rocks are hard - I flashed quickly out of the fantasy and what came was, I am creating a hard task for myself in attempting to share the personal ways I use fantasy. My confusion ended and I had created an example to share with you.

2. Sometimes a fantasy will demand my attention and offer me some new information about my present experience. While talking with Tom (a client), I suddenly saw him torturing another image of himself chained to a dungeon wall. The entire fantasy took about two seconds and the message that developed was - during most of the session Tom is appearing to be self-critical and seems to be quite angry with himself. I shared my fantasy and message with Tom and found that my fantasy created some new significant material for Tom and me to work with. Tom had been aware of a lot of self anger and yet had paid little attention to these feelings.

These instant fantasies usually relate to my immediate experience and offer me new information that usually proves to be significant and valuable.

3. When I don't feel much energy to be where I happen to be I close my eyes and this kind of fantasy emerges - "I'm with a lot of people on a beach and having a joyous time; we're playing a lot of fun games, laughing, kissing, hugging, and touching each other - and I'm really feeling closeness and warmth". After about 20 seconds I return to the meeting that I happen to be attending, and see the very familiar cold and distant faces. I discover how different and almost opposite my "meeting" experience is from my fantasy. The uncaring atmosphere in the meeting becomes extremely clear for me and I re-create my fantasy; only this time, I stage the people I'm meeting with in my fantasy. The fantasy was even greater than the first. Now, with my "new" awareness of wanting to get closer to these people and make our being together more lively and fun, I can search for some ways to make this happen. My fantasy may never completely come true, and then again something more fun may happen!

4. With fantasy, I have the power to be whoever I want, be with whomever I choose, be doing whatever I want and go wherever I want. I can change my profession, age, sex, color; be an animal, plant, mountain, or any inanimate object.

By being a closet I'm aware of having a lot within me ready to be opened and explored; by being a crystal clear pond I discover how calm I can be, and as a waterfall how exciting and powerful I am. I could go on and on and I am excited to begin sharing how I use fantasy in therapy.

Using Fantasy in Therapy

For me, a major goal of therapy is to teach the client some skills in order to eventually become his or her own therapist. Hopefully, by utilizing fantasy in therapy, the client will, (1) recognize the value of fantasy experiences, and (2) become aware of constructive ways to use fantasy in every day living. Fantasy can be utilized in therapy and in life three major ways - 1) contacting an unavailable person or completing an unfinished situation; 2) exploring new or unfamiliar aspects of oneself; and exploring the unknown; 3) experiencing a structured fantasy that usually presents interesting awareness.

1. Contacting an unavailable person or completing an unfinished situation: A client/person often reports having feelings for a person who is not readily available (i.e., the person may live very far away, may have died, and so on). The person may be the client's mom, dad, ex-boy/girl-friend, or any other person he or she has had contact with.

Fantasy offers the client an opportunity to express unshared feelings with this unavailable person and attempt to complete the unfinished situation. The situation may have occurred years ago (and usually does) and yet, through fantasy, can dramatically be recaptured in the present.

Following is an interesting example -
A 29-year old woman (Sally), whose husband (Peter) had tragically died 5 years earlier, was describing her life as very meaningless. I asked her how long she had been feeling this way, and she said "since my husband died." I suggested that she imagine her husband sitting before her and describe to him what living has been like. She said that the only way that she could do that was to close her eyes and to fantasize herself dying and then meeting her husband up in heaven. In the fantasy she meets her husband and they hug and kiss each other very warmly. Sally tells Peter how very much she's missed him and begins to cry. I ask her to tell him what her tears are about and she shares with him about how she wishes she were dead as life without him has been so meaningless. I then ask her how Peter reacts to her feelings of hopelessness. She becomes Peter's voice and begins to strongly tell her to "start to live again...you've got a long life ahead of you...I want you to get out of this hole you are in and begin to live!!" Sally suddenly opens her eyes and returns to the room - her face seems to show more color and life to it. She says that she really believes Peter would say that and she reports feeling a lot of energy (which she has not felt in years). The fantasy dialogue with her husband allowed her to cry and to share her present life with him, and get a response from him about her present behavior. A large part of Sally had died when Peter died and now she was beginning to complete an unfinished situation and go on using her energy in new ways. When an unfinished situation with an unavailable person exists I ask the client to imagine the person sitting before him or her and begin to share feelings and perceptions as if they existed right now. I then ask the person to become that other person and create a dialogue - most often, forgotten feelings emerge and some insights are discovered. As a person becomes familiar with the above process, he or she can utilize it as incomplete situations arise in daily living.

2. Exploring new or unfamiliar aspects of oneself, and exploring the unknown: A person often describes a part of his or her personality in therapy, for example, "I am basically a shy and naive person". At the same time, though, this person may be in therapy to overcome shyness and learn to become somewhat assertive and aggressive. Fantasy can be utilized as a way to explore what these new behaviors feel like.

Following is an example of this process:
John usually manipulates the females he has relationships with and also reports being a little uncomfortable with this behavior. I ask him to fantasize (out loud) a very manipulative scene with a female and then one in which he finds himself being very honest and straight. He discovers that he really enjoyed his own honesty and discovered in the second scene that the woman respected him much more. Through fantasy - hard persons can experience their softness, weak persons can try out being strong, frightened persons can become scary, and serious persons can have fun. Trying out new and unfamiliar behavior through fantasy is a giant first step towards incorporating this new behavior in real life. Fantasy allows a person to safely explore this new way of being and usually encourages the behavior in reality.

Fantasy can also be used with a person in exploring an unknown future situation. For example - one of my clients was planning to confront her boss about how badly he had been treating her. The dialogue follows -

Client (fantasizing boss sitting before her in empty chair): I've just had it with you...I'm tired of you telling me what to do every minute of the day...You just treat me as if I were your teenage daughter or something (all of this said with some anger and now there's silence).

Me: What do you imagine his response would be to what you are saying now. Sit in his chair and be him responding to you.

Client: (being boss - talking back to herself) - What are you getting so upset for...calm down...there's no need...you shouldn't be so serious about all this (sounds very protective).

Me: Come back to your chair and respond to that.

Client: That's just how he'd respond (talking to me).

Me: Say that to him sitting over there.

Client: That's just what you'd say to me. Well, I'm tired of you.

Me: Say "I'm tired of you" again.

Client: I'm tired of you (moving her arms somewhat angrily).

Me: Louder.

Client: "I'm tired of you!!"

Me: Again (my voice is very loud).

Client: "I'm tired of you!!! Wow, I really feel relieved.

Me: You look better - You've been holding that in for quite a while.

Client: Yes, I have.

Me: Now that you have that anger out of the way, tell him how you'd like to be treated.

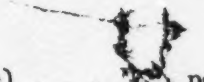
Client: I'd like you to treat me as another grown-up person and realize that I can usually take care of myself and when I need you to help me out I'll ask you for it. (said assertively and from the heart).

Me: What did you learn from this encounter.

Client: I feel more in touch with how I feel about him - Now that I have released most of my anger, I may be able to face him directly and really tell him who I am without turning him off with my anger or having him just begin protecting me as he usually does. I also feel as though I've already told him what I want right here, which will make it much easier to tell him in person. I'm glad I did that.

By exploring this unknown future event through fantasy, the client expressed feelings that could easily get in the way of what she wants to communicate to her boss. The fantasy has allowed her to explore the dialogue she'll be in and become more comfortable with the feelings and words that are a part of the encounter. By fantasizing important future events, a person may be able to discover more effective ways to behave in that situation when it really happens.

3. Structured fantasy journeys: There are countless fantasies that can be suggested to a person or group of people to experience. A person can be asked to become a rock, tree, bird, house, any animal, and so forth, and to have an experience as that particular creature or object. Instructions are given as follows, for example, "Close your eyes and imagine that you are a tree . . . notice what kind of tree you are and what kind



of personality you have as a tree (silence) . . . notice your bark, are you hard, smooth, flakey, or what? (silence) . . . now, feel your roots, are they deep or are they offering little support to you? (silence) . . . take a look at your surroundings, what do you see, are you alone? (silence) . . . be back in the room when you're finished."

As a person shares his or her fantasy they are asked to speak in first person, present tense as if the fantasy was taking place again. Following is a response to the above fantasy -

John (J): I am a real tall oak and I stretch out much higher than all of the other trees . . . My bark is real hard, almost like rock, and my roots . . . aren't very deep (sounds surprised and a little scared).
Me (M): What's it like for you to have such roots?
J: I feel like I could topple over at any second.
M: So, you appear to be tall, hard, and strong on the outside, but underneath you're really very shakey or weak. Is this true?
J: It sure is.
M: John, open your eyes, and try saying to others in the group - "I may appear strong but I'm really pretty weak" or a similar sentence that fits for you.
J: I may look strong but I'm really weak (his lips begin to quiver).
M: What's happening right now?
J: I feel strange, like I want to cry or something (a few tears appear).
M: Since you feel strange, my guess is that you don't cry very much or let yourself show what are considered "weak" feelings.
J: (looking more at east) That's true, I usually need to keep a tough appearance and don't let myself cry.
M: "Real John" and "John the Tree" seem to be quite alike.
J: Yeah, that really struck me after you asked me to open my eyes and look at the people in here.
M: Did you learn something new about yourself by working with this fantasy?
J: I never realized that I have such a strong need to appear so strong, and not let myself look weak to others.
M: Is that how you want to behave or do you prefer to be different?
J: I guess I'd like to cry when I feel like it.
M: Try saying to others - "It's okay for me to be weak as well as strong."
J: (looks around the group and several times says -) "It's okay for me to be weak, as well as strong."
M: What's it like for you to say this?
J: I felt a little uncomfortable, but as I said it a few times I felt like I really wanted to be this way.
M: I'd like to go on to someone else, and I hope that you can work with this more with yourself or in a future group session.

As demonstrated in the above dialogue, most fantasies can easily be related to personal behavior or characteristics. After describing all or part of the fantasy, the above kind of dialogue may occur, or a person may simply be asked whether a part or parts of the fantasy correlate with some aspect of themself; People familiar with the process of working with their fantasies (in the above manner) can usually make a quick connection between their fantasy-self and real-self.

Following are some other interesting fantasy journeys:

1. Imagine that you're walking up a flight of stairs leading to a door at the top. When you reach the door, open it, go into the room, and see what happens. A variation is to add that a sign on the door says "My crazy room".

2. Be sitting at the side of a riverbank, and notice an object floating from upstream; as this object passes you, become it, and have an adventure.

3. You are running down a road at night, and as you look over your shoulder you see someone chasing after you. Let an adventure develop.

4. Let a fantasy develop in which you are feeling very sad (it may be something that really happened to you). Let yourself experience sadness very deeply. This can be experienced with any feelings (i.e., joy, anger, hurt, and so on).

Many other suggestions are described by John Stevens in Awareness: Exploring, experimenting, experiencing (1971, p. 137-167).

In summary, I have shared some basic principles of Experiential-Gestalt therapy and how fantasy relates to this counseling approach. I have also shared the ways that I have learned to use fantasy in my own life and in facilitating my own and others' growth. My fantasy is that you're a little confused about where to go from here and also excited about using fantasy in your own life.

REFERENCES

Gendlin, E.T. Experiential psychotherapy. In Corsini's (Ed.) Current Psychotherapies, Illinois: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1973.

Kempler, W. The experiential therapeutic encounter. Psychotherapy: Theory, research, and practice, 1967, 4, pp. 166-172.

Perls, F.S. Gestalt therapy verbatim. Lafayette, Cal.: Real People Press, 1969.

Perls, F.S., Hefferline, R., & Goodman, P. Gestalt therapy: Excitment and growth in the human personality. N.Y.: Julian Press, 1951. (Republished by Dell, 1965)

Stevens, J. Awareness: Exploring, experimenting, experiencing. Lafayette, Cal.: Real People Press, 1971.

Whitaker, C., & Malone, T. The roots of psychotherapy. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953.

Witchel, R.I. Gestalt therapy: Development, theory, and techniques. In Cook's (Ed.) Theories of counseling: A learning package. Lexington, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1974.